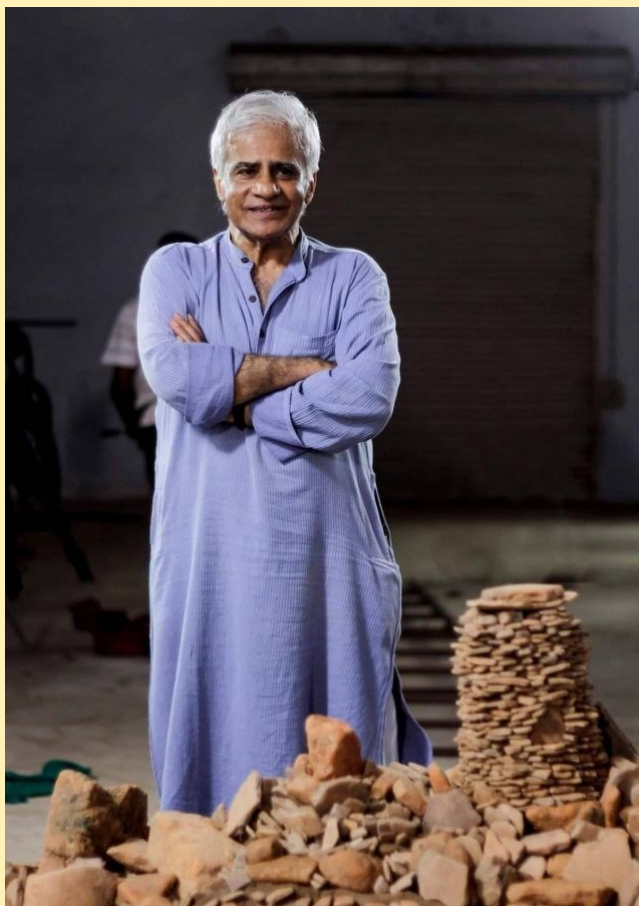


Vivan Sundaram,

the artist, the archivist, the activist

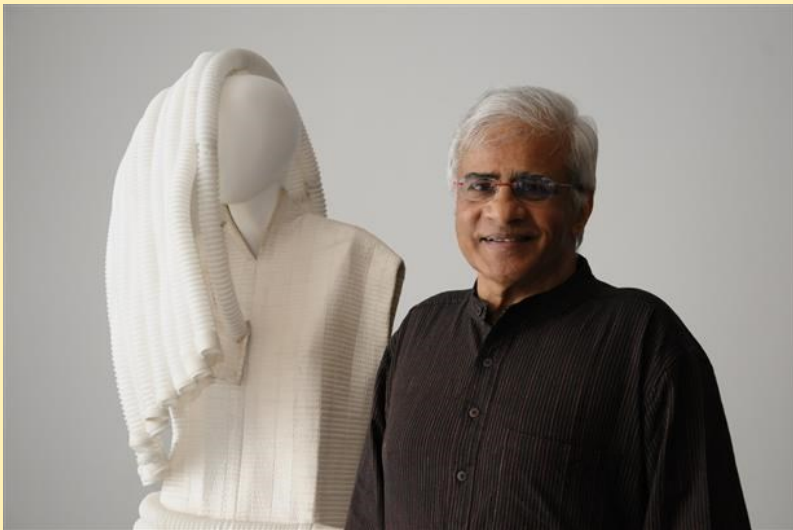


Sarika Sharma

Vivan Sundaram, the artist, the archivist, the activist

Celebrating the life and times of the luminary whose own
career intertwined with the progression of arts in the
country

Sarika Sharma



Vivan Sundaram (1943–2023) Chemould Prescott Road

Vivan Sundaram always acknowledged the many facets of his being — “the public, the political, the social, the personal”. He admitted that equating his active political self with the personal had been a struggle, but then, “the personal becomes political”, he said while discussing ‘Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self-Portrait in Letters and Writings’, in Chandigarh nine years ago.

Vivan was born into art. His maternal grandfather was the scholar-pioneer photographer Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, and his aunt, 21st century’s first avant-garde artist Amrita Sher-Gil, the central pillar of the family. Yet, he carved out his niche — as an artist, archivist and activist. His death recently leaves a yawning gap in India’s art space.

The intertwining of the personal and the political informed his work. In a career spanning several decades, the progression of his own art overlapped with the progression of art in the country over the second half of the 20th century and beyond



From the Machu Picchu series dedicated to Pablo Neruda.

Born in Shimla in 1943, Vivan went on to study art, first at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda (1961-65), and then at the Slade School of Art, London (1966-69). The latter is where, during the student movement of 1968, Vivan the artist met Vivan the activist. Back in India in the 1970s, he came under the influence of CPI(M), but was coaxed back into pursuing art by friend Prakash Karat. "He told me I would be more useful if I went back to art," he would later recall. Vivan went on to explore several mediums, leaving his mark in painting, sculpture, photographs, installations, found objects, et al.

Shireen Gandhi, creative director of Chemould Prescott Road, an art gallery in Mumbai, says that when it comes to installation art, Vivan paved the way, encouraging others to walk that path. "In the early 1990s, when the norm was artists working in traditional oil paintings, Vivan would be considered one of the earliest breakthrough artists. It was a new term, fairly unknown to the contemporary world," says Gandhi.



Great Indian Bazaar, 1997. 1,400 postcard-sized photographs in metal frames in a circular floor installation.

From amongst Vivan's immense body of work, two hugely impacted her: '12 Bed Ward' and 'Memorial'. "The former was made with old shoes, string, wire and light bulbs that dimly hung from the ceiling. The room felt more moving than eerie. It had references of disposability, reuse, salvage. 'Memorial' had as the central photograph a man lying dead in the middle of the road. When you speak about art leaving an indelible memory of a moment in history, Vivan's work did just that: etching deeply the Bombay riots in our minds and hearts," says Gandhi.

Vivan constantly delved into the works of his maternal grandfather and aunt, including the installation 'The Sher-Gil Archive' (1995), and as digital photomontages, such as 'Re-take of Amrita' (2001–06), based on photographs taken by Umrao Singh Sher-Gil. His authored works on the family include the two-volume book 'Amrita Sher-Gil: A Self Portrait in Letters and Writing'.

His active engagement in art manifested itself in not just practice art, but its promotion as well. In 1976, he founded the Kasauli Art Centre (KAC) at Ivy Lodge, a house he had inherited from his mother, Indira, Amrita's elder sister. In what is hailed as India's first art residency, KAC was engaged in activities such as workshops, seminars and residencies. Most works produced there found their way to the Fine Arts Museum at Panjab University where Prof BN Goswamy had agreed to offer space and monetary help, shares Diwan Manna, chairperson of Punjab Lalit Kala Akademi. KAC closed down 15 years later, but was resurrected as Kasauli Art Project as part of the Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation, established in 2016 to carry forward the legacy of the family. Several artists from KAC were also part of the historic 1981 exhibition, 'Place for People', marking the shift from modernism to post-modernism in Indian art.

Love for the arts is what endeared him across the border as well, says artist Salima Hashmi, who first met Vivan and his wife, art critic Geeta Kapur, in the 1980s, when they came to see Amrita's Lahore house. "I will

always remember him for his knowledge, wisdom and research into the early period of modern art in the subcontinent,” says Hashmi, daughter of poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, adding that he was always committed to encouraging young artists from Pakistan.

The activist in Vivan flourished throughout. What began with sloganeering — “all art is bourgeoisie” — turned into active participation in protests, especially during the Emergency, and standing up against forces threatening “the democratic spirit of creative spirit” as the founder trustee of Sahmat.

Vivan’s last commissioned work is ‘Six Stations of a Life Pursued’, currently on display at the ongoing Sharjah Biennial. A photography-based project, it signifies “a journey with periodic halts that release pain, regain trust, behold beauty, recall horror and discard memory — a life pursued”, reads the text for the work, written by Geeta Kapur.

The most apt swan song for an artist who was a humanist.

Defining work

The first major retrospective of Vivan Sundaram’s 50-year career, held at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi in 2018, showcased the range of his works: some of his early kitsch works from the 1960s, the Machu Picchu

series of drawings dedicated to the Chilean revolutionary poet Pablo Neruda (exhibited at the ongoing Kochi-Muziris Biennale); engine oil drawings and installation (1991) created as a reaction to the First Gulf War; to his most recent co-authored projects '409 Ramkinkars' (2015) and 'Meanings of Failed Action: Insurrection 1946' (2017). His other important works include a site-specific installation at the Victoria Memorial, Calcutta, now referred to as 'History Project' (1998), marking 50 years of India's freedom; and 'Signs of Fire' (1984), his lamentation of Delhi's anti-Sikh riots.







